

REAL ESTATE

RENTALS

CAREERS

AUTO

CLASSIFIEDS

News

Obituaries

Business News

Sports

Raiders

A's

Warriors

49ers

Giants

Sharks

Turn2

Op-Ed

Opinions/Editorials

Health

Women's Health

Men's Health

Senior Health

Bay Area Living

Food

InsideOut

Travel

Movie Listings

TV Listings

Horoscopes

Soap Opera Recaps

Community

Almanac

Bay Area Best

Education

STAR Scores

Teacher Support

Great Schools

Services

Newsletters

About Us

Contact Us

Feedback

Place a Classified Ad

Archives



Years after oil spill, San Mateo sees restoration funds

By Amelia Hansen, STAFF WRITER

Seven years after a Greek tanker discharged 3,000 gallons of oil into the ocean, killing more than 1,000 birds and sending toxic tar balls onto 15 miles of the San Mateo County coast, restoration projects are under way to restore local beaches, wildlife and habitat.

Last summer, a council of state and federal employees finalized a \$4 million restoration plan that will fund 10 projects, ranging from a \$20,000 beach access improvement plan to a \$1,225,035 seabird colony protection project.

Some of those projects, including a plan to protect the Marbled Murrelet seabird in the Santa Cruz Mountains, started last fall. Others will be completed this year or stretched out over a five-year period.

"This is an opportunity for some good to come from something that caused damage," said Joanne Kerbavaz, resource ecologist with California State Parks, who is overseeing some projects in San Mateo County.

The spill occurred on the night of Sept. 26, 1998, as the tanker M/V Command left San Francisco Bay for Panama. As was determined in court, the captain knowingly discharged oil off the coast and failed to report it to the Coast Guard. Beach volunteers began noticing the large globs of tar and oil birds and contacted authorities.

The Coast Guard tracked down the Command in Panama, the first time the agency tracked down an alleged polluter in international waters. The restoration plan is funded through a larger,

\$9.4 million settlement reached between the shipping company and the United States Attorney's office.

The oiled birds and tar balls may be gone, but the Command council hopes to use the money to improve many areas on the Coast.

The seabird colony restoration project, for example, will stretch over a five-year period. The spill is estimated to have impacted 1,490 common murres and place 11,193 other birds at risk.

The primary goal of the program, according to final plan, is to improve the nesting success of California's resident breeding species — especially murres, brown pelicans and cormorants — by reducing disturbance at their breeding colonies.

After an initial monitoring phase, the program will focus specifically on reducing human disturbance through education — posting warnings at coastal launch sites, on anchored buoys conducting outreach with sport fishermen. Video surveillance at key bird colonies may also be used.

The scope of the restoration project extends far beyond San Mateo County in some instances.

The sooty shearwater restoration project, which will cost \$390,300, will target eradicating black rats in New Zealand. The rats dine on the chicks and eggs of the sooty shearwater, a seabird that migrates from the southern hemisphere to the California Coast.

Twelve oiled shearwaters, including one banded in New Zealand, were collected during the spill. The planning phase of the project is just beginning; the eradication component will take place in 2006.

During the drafting of the overall restoration plan, some local residents objected to some of the project, saying the money could be better used at home.

But Charlene Andrade, biologist with the United State Fish and Wildlife Service, said projects like the New Zealand rat program will benefit other resources.

"Those birds use the San Mateo County Coast to a great extent," said Andrade, who is coordinating the shearwater project. "Even though it's in New Zealand, it will provide significant resources to our front yard."

The Command Oil Spill Natural Resources Trustee Council is comprised of representatives of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, the California Department of Fish & Game, the California State Lands Commission and the California Department of Parks & Recreation.